



## Global Context - Local Concepts

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## **Global Context - Local Concepts**

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**Susanne Thorbek**

# **Global Context - Local Concepts**

## **Global Context - Local Concepts**

In this paper I want to raise the question of increasing globalization and increasing use of and arguments for local analysis which I think translates into the discussions of essence and difference. My own work has been on women in slumareas in two Asian countries, where I have lived with and tried to communicate with women and listened to their stories.

One of the categories I used in the interpretations of women's daily life and in the comparative study was women's identity as a sociological category, as created through the semi-public talks in the area. I found that the women in Colombo identified strongly with their roles in the family: daughter, wife, mother, whereas the women in Bangkok had a much broader and more varied basis for their identification - and this seemed to be an important reason behind the greater room of manoeuvre for the Thai women.

In this article I will discuss the concept of identity - which it is argued is always sociological or political, always created through debates. And secondly I will discuss a view on women's sexuality/pleasure and the more or less rigid family organization of society which, it seems to me, give deeper understanding of the differences between the women in Colombo and Bangkok. In my field work I had the feeling that there was more behind women's stories than I could catch and I have had the same feeling when reading other scholars' work for instance on ethnicity and gender (Abeysekere 1983).

Generally tendencies today in 3. world research as well as in feminist research seems to go to lower and lower levels of abstractions - to more and more specific and localized themes. And of course in feminist research, the focus on differences and the critique of thinking in essences

have flourished. "At meetings, workshops, and conferences in the 1980s feminist scholars became accustomed to hearing women accuse one another of essentialism" (Jane Roland Martin 1994).

At the same time however globalization strengthens and deepens international links. Today near to all societies are striving for more market less state, more "civil society" and NGOs, less state and financial flows, commodities and raw materials move more than ever around the globe. New is that people move too, both in the sense of migrants and refugees and as tourists. And what used to be called culture gets more commercialized, advertisements is increasing and the electronic medias and their programs as well as films and other electronic communication becomes commodities- as books always were too, but more durable and open for second-hand use.

Thus one would think that the debate from the 70s on global structures could be re-opened and domination and the struggle for hegemony researched. The situation is thus somewhat ironic - as globalization increases the call for local context, the search for differences grows.

The two tendencies are however far from unrelated. It is hardly an accident that those which have been in the forefront in criticising "Western science", Enlightenment thinking or using less grandiose terms just criticizing concepts, or the way of questioning society and culture are from those countries which are homes for great amounts of people from the 3. world as USA, Britain, France. In his discussion of post-structuralism, mainly in France, Robert Young opens the book with the following statement: "If 'so-called post-structuralism' is the product of a single historical moment, then that moment is probably not May 1968, but rather the Algerian War of Independence - no doubt itself both a symptom and a product. In this respect it is significant that Sartre, Althusser, Derrida, and Lyotard among others were all either born in

Algeria or personally involved with the events of the war" (Young 1990, p 1). It goes through Young's work that the political dimension of the discussion of science is and has been of greatest importance and Foucault stress the same point in his writings, as Adorno, Horkheimer and their colleagues did. The political dimension is likewise important to some of the English discussions and I will take as an example of the critique of science and the concepts we use, the discussion of identity by Stuart Hall.

## **Identity and the other**

The example is chosen because the logic of identity is so familiar: at the theoretical level, where it is central to a whole range of debates, philosophically starting with the critique of the Cartesian subject which was thought of as well as the ground for thinking as for action, and at the existential level in psychological and socio-psychological debates where the self is seen as a continuous unfolding inner "thing" which unfolds itself into selfhood or is found through work with the self. The concept of identity is thus at the intersection between a whole range of debates and maybe the most important aspect in believing in identity is that it gives us a good nights sleep. Something is stable in this confusing and changing world.

However as Hall argues the concept of identity has been destabilised or decentered by at least five important contributions. Marx wrote about history which we create but not on our own conditions, thus questioning the concept of self and social practise, even more so in his, although often in-explicit, notions of nature - the one around us and the one inside us (A. Schmidt 1971). Freud decentered the logic of identity in his analysis of the unconscious and so did Saussure when he said: "Language was there before you. You can only say something by positioning yourself in a discourse" (Hall 1991, p 44). Later the concept of identity

has been decentered by the feminist critique of the male gaze, pointing to the context dependency of the I talking as well as by the post-colonialist or 3. world scholars who have pointed out that the human being, the I in the discourses, were not encompassing them, not to speak of the multitude of people living around the world, who are very seldom if ever seen as subjects. In this way individual identity but surely also the collective identities, as class, nation, gender, ethnicity, hoped for as the basis for solidarity and common protest, have been undermined.

Concepts of identity have always been created through opposition, through distinctions or contradictions to others. Barth (1981) pointed this out for ethnic or national identity - always created by a process of boundary-drawing, and a parallel view can be put on gender or class, women as against men and vice versa, working class against bourgeoisie and so on. However the concept of The Other is one of the most problematic and has in European thinking been one of the most repressive. Helene Cixous (Jew, Algerian and French) thus writes: "I learned everything from this first spectacle: I saw how the white (French) superior, plutocratic, civilized world founded its power on the repression of populations who had suddenly become 'invisible' like proletarians, immigrant workers, minorities who are not the right 'colour'. Women, Invisible as humans. But, of course, perceived as tools - dirty, stupid, lazy, underhanded etc. Thanks to some annihilating dialectic magic. I saw how the great, noble, 'advanced' countries established themselves by expelling what was 'strange'; excluding it but not dismissing it: enslaving it" (quoted from Young 1990 p 1). The concept of the other cannot be a concept of a really other - then we could not know anything about it, could not have a concept at all. It has to be a concept which is related to our own identity, to a notion of self.

It is, however, surprising to which degree it has been in-built in the language and discourse that difference is the same as less worth, unequal



treatment and so on. The mixing of the categories of similarity-difference and equal-unequal has been a continuous feature in much discourse, much feminist discourse too. This of course is no accident; it mirrors the ways mainstream thought have worked through dichotomies which were hierarchically organized and through vast generalizations.

Bradiotti states this point in the following way: "In the European History of philosophy 'difference' is a central concept in so far as Western thought always functioned by dualistic opposition, which create sub-categories of otherness or 'difference-from'. Because in this history, 'difference' has been predicated on relations of domination and exclusion, to be 'different-from' came to mean to be 'less than', to be worth less than. Difference has been colonized by power relations that reduce it to inferiority, as Simone de Beauvoir pertinently put it in *The Second Sex*." (Bradiotti 1994, p 2). Bradiotti refer to the Nazis and Fascists as the extreme of this thinking in difference as inferiority and possible genocide. Svend Lindqvist (1993) shows how the thinking behind the extermination/genocide on Jews and Romanies by Nazism was in concordance with western thinking, especially English since the Germans came rather late to this reflections - they were late at conquering colonies too. The thinking he refers to is both scientific and popular knowledge: the idea of evolution where the humans develop like the natural world from all kinds of coloured people to the white civilized (British) nation and, although less relevant today, physical anthropology. Both argued that since the 'lower' races were anyway going to die in competition with the superior Western civilization it was as well to kill them fast, and he quotes as late a person as Churchill for a vivid and it seems excited description of a murderous genocide in Sudan. Thus Bradiotti may be right that no western intellectual can think without taking Auschwitz into her thinking - maybe we ought rather not to be able to think without integrating the 3. world and their part of our history as the basis for our thinking too.

Where does this then leave us? It seems that notions of essences is for very sensible theoretical as well as political reasons are buried - and the notion of identity in particular. It seems too that difference is hard to think and not least act upon or with. Very different conclusions have been drawn from the critique from a total refusal of scientific (and political) thinking among the most extreme post-modernists which leaves us with total relativism - also a political stance as Sandra Harding aptly summarize it, in the position of the husband returning home to a wife which is unsatisfied, hunch his shoulder and says: "Well my dear, everything is relative". (Harding 1986) To demands for positioned knowledge where the author do not claim an anonymous, just scientific, God's Eye, and sociological analysis of the process of knowledge production (Harding 1991). Personally I do not find any of the isms convincing enough, and find it difficult to asset the consequences or implications. I find too that the different disciplines in social and humanistic studies sometimes set certain limits to the transfer of assumptions, methods of work and so on. So I will discuss ways of working which seems promising in my view and give an example of such an analysis in feminism which I find combine the global and the local in an extremely interesting way.

## **Essence and difference**

The notion of identity became buried - but it come back again. We can hardly avoid any reference to I, subjectivity, identity and their connotations. The call for positioning of the researcher presuppose an I, an identity too. Neither is it possible to think without thinking in differences, or the others. So we have to do it but hopefully in another way. Lorde wrote in a late work about differences: "Too often we pour the energy needed for recognizing and exploring differences into pretending that those differences are unsurmountable barriers or that they

do not exist at all.....Either way we do not develop tools for using human difference as a springboard for creative change within our lives. For we have built into us old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of these structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 1993, p 5)

We have to denote something essential with our words, among these our notions of identity. We have to accept too that such notions are created through opposites, distinctions even contradictions. But the way we think them may be different. First we can write from a position, attempt to give some impression of where we are. And I write where we are, because one of the lessons of the critique of the concept of identity is that identity is always in creation, always in process, it is not something inside us which more or less slowly unfolds, it is a continuous process, of being told, being created. And identity is very much created through the stories we tell about ourselves and the relations to other. Because our stories, narratives are not just told, they are always told **to** somebody and thus told with the other in mind.

Hall writes of the process of identification: "But something we have learned from the whole discussion of identification, in feminism and psychoanalysis, is the degree to which that structure of identification is always, constructed through ambivalence. Always constructed through splitting. Splitting between that which one is and that which is the other. The attempt to expel the other to the other side of the universe is always compounded by the relationship of love and desire. This is a different language from the language of, as it were, the others who are completely different from oneself." (Hall 1991, p 48). Thus if we can write and speak from positions, however fluid and moving these may be, take our essences or concepts as provisional, as seen from the position we inhabit

for the time being and if we can think of the other as always also inside ourselves we may do less repressive and more enlightening thinking. The political implications which Hall draws from this is among others that collective identities - class, gender, nation, race or whatever are never given. There is no history which is a sort of security net when we fail - we depend on our ability to create common ground and do it in situations where "others" mix and influence us. He gives an example of the collective identity Black created in Britain. How nobody ever felt black when they arrived in Britain, but were defined so by the english society from the kids to the institutions. Black then became a common identity for those coming from the former or existing common-wealth, an offensive identity taken on for the sake of protest of discrimination and as a ground for solidarity for people coming from around the globe. Black thus became a political category - it had never been an identity and certainly has nothing to do with colours. It was an identity created by the oppression by others but was changed into a positive call for commonality. Of course there were lots of internal contradictions, among these among men and women, still it was possible by speaking from positions of difference to allow for these and at the same time fight back. (See Vron Ware 1992 for an account of the discussions and contradictions inside the movement from a feminists point of view). Where do this notions of identity and the other, of essence and difference leave us when it comes to the global perspective?

### **The Global and the Local - an example**

The global perspective is far easier to see when it comes to the hegemonic forces of globalization, centred in money and capital, in dominating states and their military and the control of the dominant electronic media and the news-services. It is much harder when it comes to critical movements. Not that problems are not global - as problems of poverty and polarization, racism and patriarchy, ecology and wars, but

where and how to discuss possible common ground for critical voices? Gayatri, C Spivak has in an article: "French Feminism in an International Frame" addressed this question. She is one of the most influential de-constructionist scholars. Born and educated in Calcutta she has now taught literature for 20 years or more in the USA, and she is, according to her own description, a feminist and a marxist too. She introduced and translated Derrida's: "On Grammatology" in the 70s.

In the article "French Feminism in an International Frame" - she opens with a discussion of one of the great, but mostly silenced problems facing women: clitoridectomy, and tells about a Sudanese colleague researching this in the theoretical frame of functionalism. Spivak criticises the frame and is thus reminded of her own travel through theories, either accidental or highly over-determined. This led her into what was called international feminism- a highly eurocentric field which at best asked: What can I do **for** them? Thus she discusses 'international feminism' by "reversing and displacing (if only by juxtaposing some french texts and a "certain Calcutta") the ironclad opposition of East and West." This seems a hopeless idealistic project to her but "I am not in a position of choice in this dilemma" (Spivak 1987, p 135).

Thus Spivak goes into a discussion of french feminists. She criticizes K. Kristeva's work "About Chinese Women" which she in the end claims is "reflecting a broader Western Cultural practice, the "classical " East is studied with primitivistic reverence, even as the "contemporary" East is treated with real-political contempt" (Spivak 1987, p 138) And both it seems on a very shaky basis with little evidence of either data or literature. Spivak discusses Kristeva's and Cixous' works at some length and whereas she finds them problematic when applied as mentioned to 3. world women and 3. world literature, and problematic too since the ideal for writing, according to her, is the avant-garde literature which problematizes language itself in the writing. She finds that the political

potential of this is maybe greater for the writer than for the reader- and highly complicated by that.

However the French Feminists de-construction of the leading discourses she finds highly interesting. One of the outcomes of this critique of discourses is the distinction between feminism and sexism. Whereas sexism or rather counter-sexism will work from the women's interests, body, point of view and thus establish some sort of female essence, as a normative subjectivity, feminism will have a historically situated double view on gender relations. And as Sandra Harding later framed it: feminism is open of course to men and women as a movement and a scientific project, whereas the assumption of an essential woman as the ground for research closes both research and movement for men (as for those women who do not feel alike to the prescriptions) (Harding 1991).

## **The best gift of French Feminism**

Spivak is searching for some sort of common ground for women, some theme which might give a common perspective, a common lot. What has so far been pointed at for such common ground have been women's ability to get pregnant, deliver and feed children, the creation of life. There is no doubt that the ways and forms of mothering are highly different in practise and in thinking around the globe and no doubt that mothering has been used, is indeed the main argument for, confining women to the private, to the home - in theory. Thus context determined, history-specific, always socially moulded - often in ways which are highly repressive for women, motherhood still seems a common ground and a great contribution of women to the survival of mankind.

But as Spivak points out with some french feminists there is a "move before the reproductive coupling of man and woman, before the closing of the circle whose only productive excess is the child, and whose 'outside' is the man's 'active' life in society. Nature has programmed

female sexual pleasure independently from the needs of reproduction ... Male orgasmic pleasure 'normally' entails the male reproductive act-semination. Female orgasmic pleasure..... does not entail any one component of the heterogenous female reproductive scenario: ovulation, fertilization, conception, gestation, birthing. The clitoris escapes reproductive framing" (Spivak 1987, p 151).

Thus french feminist has taken up and discussed the theme of women's pleasure (joissance) and Spivak argues that "in legally defining women as objects of exchange it is not only the womb that is literally 'appropriated'; it is the clitoris as the signifier of the sexed subject that is effaced" (Spivak 1987, p 151). Thus the whole history of family and kinship of women as objects, objects of exchange, sex-objects or otherwise can be seen as an effacement of clitoris. "And we do not have to turn to 'primitive' societies to find such practices. The whole industries focusing on all kinds of the 'Facade' of women from cosmetics to underwear, pornography and prostitution, the double standard in the criteria of men's and women's aging, the public versus private dimensions of menopause as opposed to impotence are all questions related to this question." (Spivak 1987, p 151).

Women as mother, as androgyne, as unsexed has been a norm and has been expressed even in the Greek myths. Spivak points to Teresias - the prophet in many myths who lived 7 years as a woman then as a man. Thus he had exceptional experiences and once when Zeus and Hera, the quintessential wife, discussed whether men or women had the greatest pleasure of sexuality, they asked him. He answered without hesitation: "Woman has nine times as much pleasure as the man" (translated from danish Hjortsø 1984, p 251). Hera got so angry, she blinded him for this answer, but Zeus then gave him the gift of prophecy. The denial of women's pleasure is one result of the silencing of women on themes as their body and their pleasure.

There are discussions in french feminism as to the body and the thinking and the material conditions or social practices and their interrelationships. Spivak argues that the body is politically defined, and that body and society thus cannot be separated but is intertwined and inseparable. She mentions as an example the whole industry of homeownership in USA, mostly seen as a pre-condition for family life and the sanctity of the nuclear family. Thus the point is not to discuss women's pleasure instead of labour market or housing but to attempt to see how these themes are interrelated. She argues that we need context-dependent, local, specific analysis of women's pleasure around the world. "What such a heterogeneous sex-analysis would disclose is that the repression of the clitoris in the general and the narrow sense (the difference cannot be absolute) is presupposed by both patriarchy and family" (Spivak 1987, p 153). And Spivak ends the article: "I emphasize discontinuity, heterogeneity ... because the work cannot by itself obliterate the problems of race and class....It might, one hopes, promote a sense of our common yet history-specific lot. It ties together the terrified child held down by her grandmother as the blood runs down her groin and the 'liberated' heterosexual woman..... For me it is the best gift of French feminism, that it cannot itself fully acknowledge, and that we must work at; here is a theme that can liberate my colleague from Sudan, and a theme the old washerwomen by the river would understand" (Spivak 1987, p 153).

However, the call Spivak makes for specific analysis of a global theme, central for women can not define women's pleasure and certainly not as either situated in vagina or clitoris. This would be just one more example of prescriptions for women. Neither can it argue that the uterine organization of societies in families should be abolished in favour of an organization around women's needs. But the call for such studies will



helps us to see links between different aspects of women's lives and help our creativity in changing these.

### **Women's identity in Ratmalana and Khlong Toey**

The concepts of identity (and the other) and of women's sexuality; pleasure, enjoyment as expressed and moulded through social organization within a global frame seems important to studies of women in different countries. In my own work I utilised the concept of female identity: "In the Slum Culture of Ratmalana, gender is fundamental, and the limitations it creates for women as also the strength it gives certain women to live with those limitations and the tasks afforded them by womanhood, are very visible. Female identity must be understood as a sociological category - as the ideas about women and men expressed more or less publicly in women's groups, men's group's or mixed groups." (Thorbeck 1994, p 87). I found quite remarkable differences between women's notions of female identity in the two areas. In Ratmalana (Sri Lanka) the women identified quite strongly with the family: husband and children and their self-esteem were built on their roles in the family, whereas the women in Khlong Toey had much broader basis for their identity as women and said: "the Thais are a free people", when asked about their habits and norms.

The concepts of the other varied accordingly: prostitution was a treat to women's dignity in both areas but whereas a woman in Ratmalana could say: "they live like animals "or" I don't talk to her, I don't go and drink tea with her. If she talks I answer, if she smiles I smile too, but I don't socialize with her", the reactions in Khlong Toey were very different to different prostitutes. The individual woman's situation was taken into account, one was said to hunt for food, one to have fun and so on. In general however the problem was not talked about, but silenced.

In Ratmalana another "other" was white women , tourism and the shameless behaviour of white women, their divorces and loose living. In Bangkok reactions to white women were low toned and seldom condemning. But in both cases the other talked about was rather deviant women than men, and as can be seen maybe white women. In quite a few cases the other was defined in terms of rich or ruling people.

In the studies I did not ask questions about desire and sexuality and did not find much written material either. But I had a feeling of quite different notions on this theme. Thus from whatever material I could gather I attempted to assess the sexual relations and women's views on these. In Thailand, I wrote, "sexuality is a dangerous power and must be controlled, and as the man is a wiser and more spiritual creature, it is he who should control the sexuality of a woman which is a continuous danger to him.....But in fact (of course) women are perfectly capable of controlling their own sexuality, and it is a bad thing, although by no means disastrous if a young girl loses her virginity" (Thorbek 1987, p 85). "She will soon find another boyfriend commented a woman (her mother actually ST) which also corresponds to the legitimacy of remarrying after a divorce (de facto) and such marriages can last for years and be stable" (Thorbek 1994, p 152/153). On the other hand in Ratmalana women "attach great importance to their significance in the family as virgins, mothers and wives, and the concepts of virtue and chastity are highly important. They bear a great responsibility for their families, not only in terms of household work and children, but also in terms of their entire value as persons." (Thorbek 1994, p 154).

Thus my impression was that women in Khlong Toey had a greater scope for their own subjectivity and pleasure than the women in Ratmalana and the social organization in everyday life varied accordingly. Family life was extremely important in both areas and more stable in Khlong Toey than in Ratmalana, but in Bangkok a woman could live single too, either

as young or as divorced, if she so preferred. Changing relationships to men were certainly not seen on with mild eyes, but as soon as a partner could be seen as stable such a relationship was accepted.

These differences between the women's notions of themselves were woven into their every-day life, their relations to other women, their outspokenness against or accept of repression, the acceptance of violence and in many other ways. The history which had created such different notions of women were also different. Sri Lanka had been a colony, and all the notions of women related to Victorianism had been dominant both in government and in the missions, which were quite influential. I found that on the every-day level discussions in families were hidden, the gender struggle was visibly fought only by men, whereas women negotiated in hidden ways. Risseeuw (1988) has in her analysis discussed the surprising lack of public discussion of gender relations and she ends her analysis of women's loss of access to land with an hypothesis that men's internal struggle or competition for land pushed gender-relations out of the area of the discussed into the assumed, unquestioned (doxa in Bourdieu's terms). Without access to land, with reformed marriage laws favouring the monogamous lifelong family, a strongly segmented labour market has been created and urbanization seen as both movement to the city, wage labour and state intervention has supported the undercutting of women's room of manoeuvre.

Thailand has never been a colony, migration has been high after world war II, but most women still came directly from village to Bangkok and kept contact to their home. Missions have had very little success and Theravada Buddhism in the different Thai interpretations seems all fairly tolerant in relation to every-daylife. Here women's relative greater room of manoeuvre ( both in sexual terms and in the sense that women have been seen as working) has been exploited through prostitution and the tourism business, which in its modern commodity form grew with the

war in Indochina and later through tourism. This development do also influence relations between men and women- denial and silence on sexual matters in this area becomes acceptable, whereas women most often discuss marriages, husband, men in women's groups.

The relations, intersections between such societal, economic and political structures and changes and women's repression in different (and sometimes similar) ways, the contradictions in the notions of women and their relationship to men needs much further study. But it seems to me, that by seeing women as sexual, bodily and pleasure seeking and men too of course and thus analyzing their relationship with this theme as a turning point, we may be able to analyze and understand relations between men and women in ways which do not presuppose patriarchy and inherit its categories. Maybe it is possible to work in our studies with as well global themes as local analysis as Spivak proposes.

Spivak in this article attempt to create a common ground for women through working at a theme which, she hopes is understandable to very different kinds of women and could be a common ground for struggle. She calls for the history specific - context - dependent, local analysis and believe that this has to be done in ways which will dissolve the ongoing debate about the distinctions between material, social and body. Thus in searching for a common ground - which in feminism must have something to do with men and women and the relations between them, the focus through the reading of some French Feminists have changed from mothering and reproduction to sexuality and women's pleasure and the point that this is - in distinction from men's - not directly related to reproduction. The concepts of men and women in 'excess' utilized by the author ,too, points to the both bodily and social/material space for men and women. Thus it seems to be possible to create at least global themes - and themes which may resist the globally defined power-structures - which is common and still keep the local concepts, through juxtaposition of different kinds of thinking and country-specific debates.

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